Corporate sponsors join Pridefest and enable gay event to expand

By **Ovetta Sampson**
The Gazette

The high-pitched sounds of the Spice Girls blared from the speakers in Acacia Park. Partners, parents and police milled around the dozens of booths selling T-shirts, caps and necklaces, each emblazoned with a rainbow — the emblem of gay pride.

The usual suspects, including a small band of protesters, were out in force Sunday afternoon to wrap up Pridefest, an annual festival sponsored by the Pikes Peak Gay and Lesbian Community Center of Colorado Springs.

But there were some new participants. Coors Brewing Co. sponsored a beer garden. Airtouch Cellular offered cellular phone demonstrations. They were among 10 corporate sponsors who joined in the festival, which attracted about 3,000 people during its three-day run.

Ronald Eby, president of the Pikes Peak Gay and Lesbian Community Center, said this year's event had more support from business organizations than ever before.

"The sponsors from the mainstream community are supporting us more and more," Eby said.

Last year, the festival had only one sponsor, Eby said. This year, 10 groups gave $250 each to support the festival.

Why?

"People are much more gay-friendly here than most people think," Eby said.

Indeed, all around the country, businesses like Coors aren't just showing tolerance for gay consumers; they're actively courting their business.

A 1992 survey by the Spencer Communications Group in New York estimated that household incomes of gays and lesbians are 50 percent higher than their heterosexual counterparts. It's estimated that these consumers spend about $514 billion a year.

"People need to realize that there are gay people out there working all through this town, and if I can get their support, that can only help me," said an Airtouch cellular salesman who declined to give his name.

But corporate vendors say attending gay pride events isn't just about sales.

"It's not about money; it's about support," said John Adams, a worker from Heuberger Subaru, which for the first time drove a sponsored car in the parade. "We've been supporting the gay community for years."

For the first time, event organizers were able to expand the one-day event into a three-day weekend. The weekend was chock-full of entertainment, including a music festival on Friday night, a film festival, a golf tournament, an anti-violence workshop and, of course, the Sunday afternoon parade down Tejon street.

About 42 vendors, including All Souls Unitarian Church and the Gill Foundation, passed out pamphlets and sold wares at the sixth annual community festival.

Roxanne Ornelas and a group of friends lounged on the grass near the park's band shell, laughing and joking, eating homemade salads and nacho dishes.

"It's important for us to get out of the closets and onto the streets," Ornelas said of Pridefest, "to show people that we are here and we are normal."

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